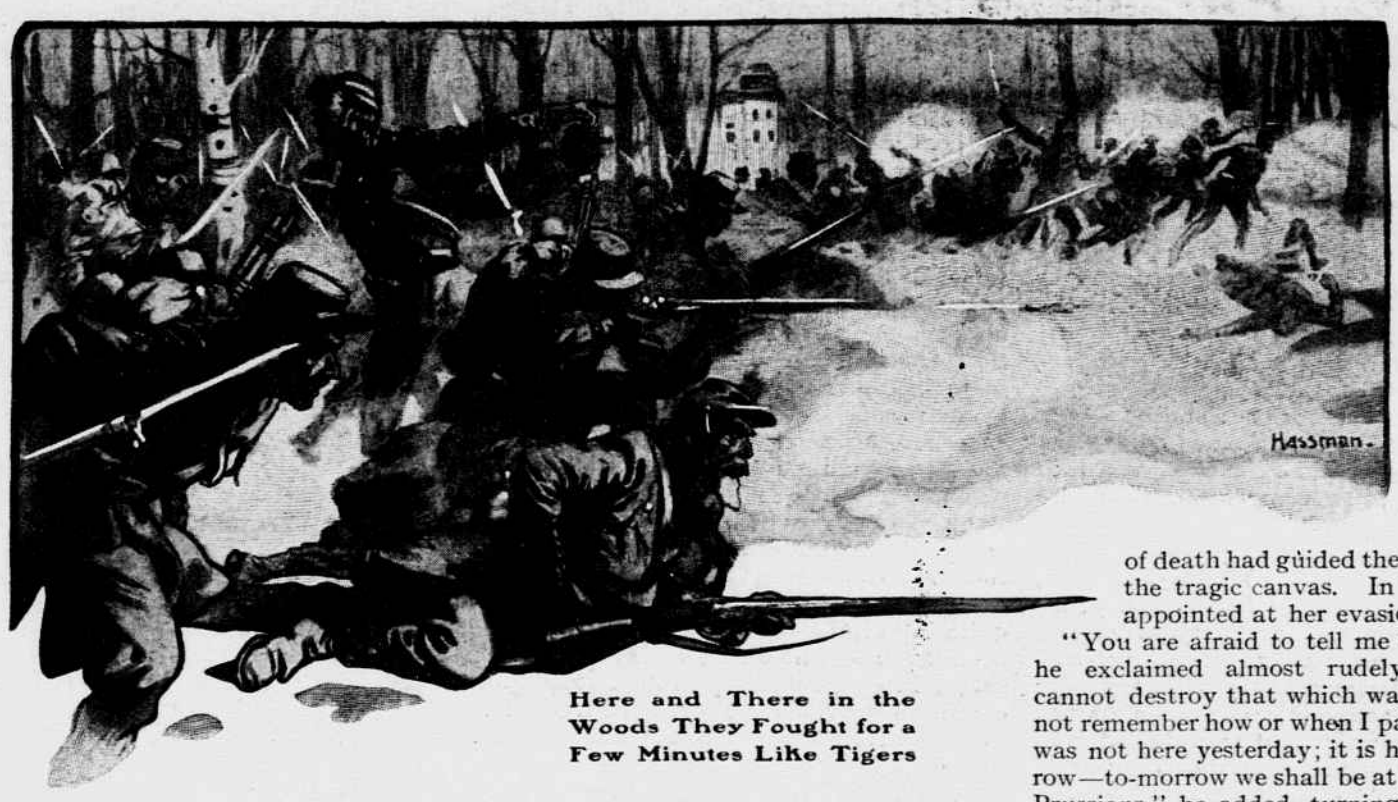
A DAUGHTER OF THE REDS

The Last Sortie and Afterward

By MAX PEMBERTON



Here and There in the Woods They Fought for a Few Minutes Like Tigers

A GROUP of intimate, convivial friends sipped tea in the studio of Gabriel the painter, and listened to the brave promises of General Ducrot, who thrice had sworn to leave his dead body on the battle-field, and each time had returned to Paris, as a wag said, with an excellent appetite and a whole wagon-load of excuses.

It was the afternoon of January 17, 1871. To-morrow would begin the last great attempt to cut a passage through the German lines at Buzenval and free this city of death and night and hunger. It was an attempt which must succeed, the General said. "We never shall return to Paris alive," he condescended to inform them. Those who had read his innumerable manifestos to his troops understood that this was only a quotation. "The General is an artist," they whispered. "He will drown the Prussians in red ink" —a horrible death, as Edmund Orlopp the English doctor admitted.

Orlopp had gone to Gabriel's studio—finely situated at the corner of the Avenue de Jéna—chiefly on account of a desire to take Dolores Morizon for a brief while from her work of charity across the river. It was something to breathe the fresher air of the west, if for only an hour; something to recall the luxury of the home she had left in the interests of those who suffered for France. Here in the broad avenues and stately houses of the rich he did not hear that thunder of sounds which knew neither night nor day, yonder in the terrible eastern streets. He did not hear the women's cry of anguish or look upon the face of suffering children. And more than that, it was a mental tonic, Orlopp said, to be under the same roof as Gabriel Sordelli.

What a patriot the man was! How his pictures reflected the ancient glories of his country! Here an allegory of Turenne and Eugene; there a splendid portrait of Ney, the bravest of the brave; or many times the figure of the greatest Frenchman of them all, the master of war, Napoleon, who, watching beyond the veil, must know of these humiliations which his beloved France had suffered. Before the war, the richest men in the world had thronged Gabriel's studio and paid fabulous sums for these noble works. To-day, a few of the artist's intimate friends looked at them almost askance and did not dare to ask him, unless with an implied apology, upon what canvas he labored. Some of the paintings, indeed, stood with their faces to the bare wall of the studio. Men said that he had ceased to paint. It was a surprise to those who came to his studio that January 17 to observe a canvas, veiled and hidden, upon the familiar easel.

Had Gabriel, then, found his brush again? or had the misfortune of the war inspired him anew? Dolores Morizon put that question, for she was privileged, when the soldiers had left and none remained but Orlopp. The answer astonished her as much as any verbal eccentricity this eccentric painter ever had uttered.

"The veiled picture? Ah, God knows what it is! There's a story about it. I'll go to the oracle and hear her. Yes, you shall tell me, mademoiselle. I painted it in my sleep—*foi d'honneur*. It was there when I took my coffee this morning. I know nothing about it. Let the Pythia speak. Is it an omen or a jest?"

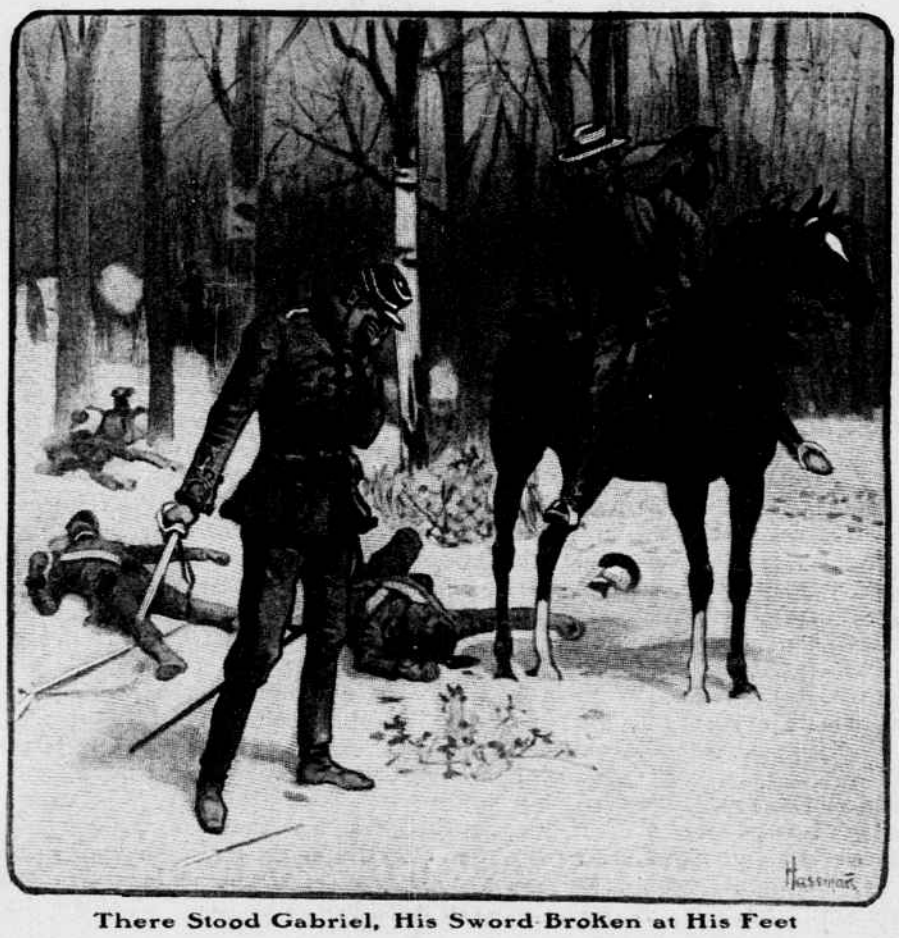
He tore aside the veil with an impulsive gesture and showed them the canvas. The picture was that of the studio in which they sat. All the details had been painted with a masterly touch: the Louis XV. couch, the heavy bear-skin rugs upon it, the great window above, with a ray of the northern light cutting the winter shadows, and striking, as with a golden pencil, at the figure upon the couch. And the figure itself! What need to ask? Had the painter then so poor a talent that one could not recognize his own portrait, even though the shadows of death crept upon the face of it. Undoubtedly the figure was that of Gabriel the artist, but not of the living Gabriel.

The weird imagination betraying itself in this picture, the power of it, a premonition that it spoke of some terrible truth, forbade those who now looked upon it to utter a single word. The artist himself watched them with an almost pathetic curiosity. What omen did they read in it? And had they, in their swift survey, justly appraised the many odd details of this mad painting? For instance, the light fell upon the dead man's face and left the body in shadow. Would it hide the wounds by which he had fallen? Or again, look deep into the shade and observe that a little hand and arm were thrust out from the right-hand side of the canvas and that the fingers touched the sleeper's heart. This human note betrayed some finer emotion of allegory, something which did not utter merely a premonition of death. Dolores believed that she understood it but she would not confess as much, "It is such a picture as one would paint at twilight," she said aloud—"and destroy at dawn," she added quickly, with a sidelong glance at the striking face of the man who dwelt upon her words so earnestly. She did not dare to tell him the plain truth, that a premonition of death had guided the brush which wrought the tragic canvas. In his turn he was disappointed at her evasion.

"You are afraid to tell me that which I know," he exclaimed almost rudely; and then: "One cannot destroy that which was foreordained. I do not remember how or when I painted this picture. It was not here yesterday; it is here to-day. To-morrow—to-morrow we shall be at Buzenval, among the Prussians," he added, turning to Edmund Orlopp, who had heard him throughout in silence.

"At Buzenval? My dear Gabriel, you were dreaming of Buzenval when you painted this absurdity. Consider how it came about. You have been brooding upon misfortune. Alone here, you take up your brush, and this gruesome thing answers to your touch. Dolores is right to speak of it as a dream. How could the Prussians kill you in the Avenue de Jéna? The truth is that all tragic omens are vague and illogical. Even the premonitions of death which come true, if analyzed would prove to be mainly an intelligent prophecy after the fact. I should destroy it. There is enough to trouble our nerves already."

He spoke with as much sang-froid as he could; for Edmund Orlopp understood as well as anyone how such a dream as this must present itself to the finer sensibilities of his friend. Gabriel Sordelli was a Celt of the Celts. The tragedy which had compelled him to live a lonely life, here in this house of shadows, had not been kept a secret. Sabine de Saint-Beuve, whose father had been killed before Metz, could fill in the missing chapters for those who remained in ignorance of it. Gabriel had been Sabine's lover in the old student days. General Saint-Beuve, her father, had mocked the young artist's poverty and been too proud to receive him when he had won success. Hence, a silent house and a face which knew little laughter and the ceaseless pursuit of fame and its aftermath. Gabriel seemed determined to humble these proud people by his triumphs. But he never spoke of Sabine to his most intimate friends.



There Stood Gabriel, His Sword Broken at His Feet

"I bow to your wisdom," he said when Orlopp had finished speaking. "Few of us are wiser than children when our superstitions are at stake. I paint a picture in my sleep, and when I awake I see that I have painted my own dead body. *Absit omen*—that is all. Is life so sweet to the best of us that death can make cowards of us? Not so. If the Pythia could have spoken," he said, turning with a smile to Dolores, "I should have welcomed the de-